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In dialogue with Rattling the Cages co-editor Eric King, James Kilgore discusses his history as an activist, underground fugitive, political prisoner, and author of books on mass incarceration. Together they explore the state of international solidarity, the abolitionist movement, and James' recent collaboration with artist Vic Liu on The Warehouse: A Visual Primer on Mass Incarceration .

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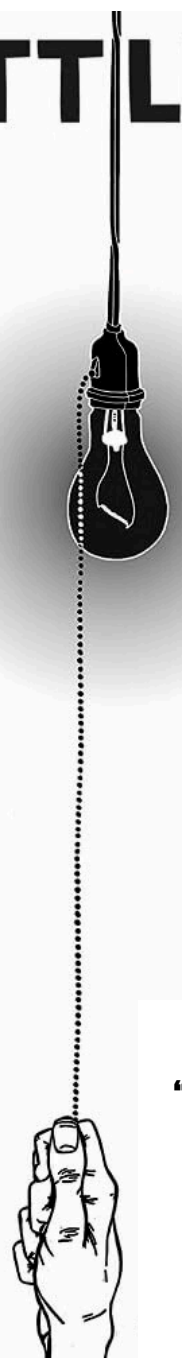
RATTLING THE CAGES

ORAL HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN POLITICAL PRISONERS



"Eric King In Conversation with James Kilgore"

ERIC KING

JAMES KILGORE

Originally hosted as a live conversation by Firestorm Books,
recording available on Firestorm's youtube channel:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=aheGldWYR04
September 22, 2024

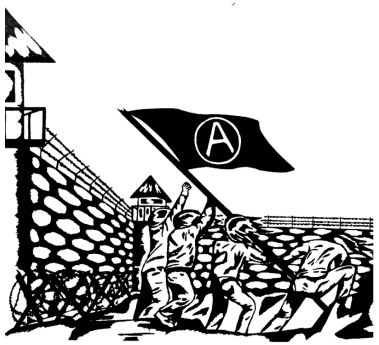
Published by AK Press, *Rattling the Cages: Oral Histories of North American Political Prisoners* is a project of abolitionists Josh Davidson and Eric King. The book is filled with the experience and wisdom of over thirty current and former North American political prisoners. It provides first-hand details of prison life and the political commitments that continue to lead prisoners into direct confrontation with state authorities and institutions.

Images & art from James Kilgore & Vic Liu, from *The Warehouse: A Visual Primer on Mass Incarceration* (PM Press, 2024).

Transcription, editing, and formatting by ev, Danielle, Josh, & Jeremy with help from Firestorm Books.

all labor volunteered

with whatever weapons at hand



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Visit your local Books Through Bars group and send books to those incarcerated (*booksthroughbarsnyc.org/resources*).

Join your nearest Anarchist Black Cross group (*abcf.net*).

Visit *rattlingthecages.com* to learn more.

Eric King is a father, poet, author, and activist. In December 2023 he was released from the supermax ADX prison after spending nearly ten years as a political prisoner for an act of protest over the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. He was held in solitary confinement for years and was met with violence by guards throughout his incarceration. Eric has published three zines: *Battle Tested* (2015), *Antifa in Prison* (2019), and *Pacing in My Cell* (2019). His sentencing statement is included in the book *Defiance: Anarchist Statements Before Judge and Jury* (2019). Eric now works as a paralegal for the Bread and Roses Legal Center.

James Kilgore is a researcher and activist based in Urbana, Illinois. Jim is the father of two sons and life partner of African historian Terri Barnes. He is the author of six books, including *The Warehouse: A Visual Primer on Mass Incarceration* and Understanding *Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time* (2015). He drafted four of those volumes (including this one) during his six and a half years in California prisons as a political prisoner. He is currently a Building Community Power Fellow at Community Justice Exchange and formerly a research fellow at MediaJustice, where he founded the Challenging E-Carceration project. He is also director of advocacy and outreach for FirstFollowers Reentry Program in Champaign, Illinois. Jim also contributed to the book *Rattling the Cages.*

Libertie Valance: Alright, we've got a big conversation ahead of us so I'll just go ahead and do my little introduction here. Thanks so much for joining us tonight. My name is Libertie, and I'm a member of the Firestorm Collective. Tonight we're excited to host a conversation that started with two abolitionist texts, *Rattling the Cages* from AK Press, and of course this event is part of a series. If you haven't watched the others, they've been fantastic, so definitely go back and watch them on our YouTube channel — and a new title from PM Press, *The Warehouse*. We had planned this conversation to include Eric king, James Kilgore, and Vic Liu, but unfortunately Vic had to cancel at the last minute and won't be able to make it tonight. But I'm still really pleased and appreciative to have Eric and James with us.

Firestorm is a 16-year-old radical bookstore owned and operated by a queer feminist collective in southern Appalachia on the land of the Cherokee people, and we strive to feature books and events that reflect our values and our interests and the needs of marginalized communities in the South. We're also continuing to do a fair number of events online because it expands accessibility and also allows us to connect with authors and speakers who might not make it to our community. So tonight is a good example of that.

Thanks so much for being here, Eric and James. I'm going to go ahead and pass off to y'all.

Eric King: Awesome. Thank you so much. Before we get started, do you want me to call you Jim or James?

James Kilgore: James, if you don't mind.

Eric King: Okay, so James, thank you for joining me. I want to start by asking if you could just give a brief overview of the SLA [Symbionese Liberation Army], your participation in it, and then really just what the SLA was to you and what led to you being locked up?

James Kilgore: Okay, thanks, Eric, and thanks Libertie, for inviting me to be on here. I've been watching some of the really dynamic interviews you've been having with other former political prisoners. I think it's a great platform here, and it's really an honor to be part of it.

Rattling the Cages

1) Political Prisoners, Mass Incarceration, & Abolition
Eric King, Herman Bell, David Gilbert, Susan Rosenberg

2). Continuing the Struggle Inside & Out
Eric King, Ashanti Alston, Ray Luc Levasseur

3) Antifascism Behind Bars
Eric King and David Campbell

4) Black August & Prisoner Support
Eric King, dequi kioni-sadiki, Harold Taylor

5) Eric King in Conversation with James Kilgore
Eric King, James Kilgore

6) Post-Prison Activism & Archiving Resistance
Eric King, Jake Conroy, Claude Marks

7) Until All Are Free
Eric King, Jason Hammond, Jeremy Hammond

8) Revolutionary Women Behind Bars
Eric King, Linda Evans, Laura Whitehorn, Nicole Kissane

9) Becoming Politicized in Prison
Eric King, Josh Davidson, Hector Rodriguez, Farhan Ahmed

10) Rattling the Cages: How We Dit It & How You Can Too
Eric King, Sara Falconer, Josh Davidson

11) Abolition Is a Family Affair
Eric King, Sharon Shoatz, susie day, Rochell Bricker

12) Looking Back at the George Jackson Brigade
Mark Cook, Janine Bertram, Eric King

all conversations are available @FirestormCoop on youtube

Write to Political Prisoners mentioned in this conversation

for a monthly updated list of political prisoners & their addresses visit

nycabc.wordpress.com

Eric King: Thank you, too.

James Kilgore: I'm going to make that question a little bit bigger. So, I came to politics really around 1969, 1970 when I was a student at UC Santa Barbara. I was also a potential draftee into the US military and that fear of that draft is kind of what got me into politics and into looking at what was going on. During my time at UC Santa Barbara, the students, among other things, burnt down the Bank of America to the ground. Although I had actually gone to bed by the time they did the burning, I still was there in spirit and that really kind of changed my idea about struggle. Particularly when, subsequent to that, we had a military occupation by the National Guard of the student community there. We had a curfew, but that really educated me about the nature of the state and really triggered a lifelong political involvement.

By 1974, I had done various things, but I moved to Berkeley / Oakland California, and on February 4, 1974, a group called the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnapped Patty Hearst, who was an heiress to the Hearst media fortune, really one of the mega-billionaires of the day. This was really a national news story, and the police and the FBI chased down the Symbionese Liberation Army, who were holding Patty Hearst, not so much for ransom, but they wanted her family to donate $6 million to give food to the poor. Which they did do. And I went to one of the food distributions they did in East Oakland, where they pulled in all these big trucks full of food, and they're throwing chickens and bread off the back of the truck. It did highlight what the ruling class could do if they really wanted to.

Not long after that, the SLA, who didn't really have an infrastructure or a proper organizational context, got trapped in a house in South Los Angeles, and on May 17, 1975, they were burned alive by the LAPD. Six of them. Three of them escaped — Bill and Emily Harris, and Patricia Hearst. They left there with nothing. They approached us, me and my partner at the time, Kathleen Soliah, perhaps known to some people as Sara Jane Olson. They needed help, so we provided support for them. We helped them get housing. We basically looked after them as best we could. We weren't really part of the SLA, we weren't really part of their political project, but we also felt a responsibility to not allow them to also be massacred by law enforcement. We knew a couple of the people that had died in the house in LA, so that's kind of how we had a connection to

particularly Bill and Emily Harris, and that's why they came to us.

We hid them out for a year and a half during that time. We also then became engaged in other activities, including a couple of bank robberies. By September 1975, Bill and Emily were captured, and myself and Kathy, we fled, and we stayed underground for a long time. I was on the run for 27 years from federal possession of explosive charges. Later on, I got charged with the bank robbery, and finally in 2002, I was captured in Cape Town, South Africa. I'll talk a little bit more about what my life was like on the run, but I'm just kind of giving you a framework. I just would say that during those 27 years, I spent a lot of time rethinking my politics and also was involved in a whole lot of political activity, particularly in southern Africa.

Eric King: Thank you. So, one of the things that I was interested in is that in your chapter in *Rattling the Cages* you mention that there was a group called Revolutionary Action, I believe, who was doing things, and that some of them got arrested, and you went to visit them. Like you would visit them inside, and then later on, after the pigs burned your friends alive, you ended up joining the SLA. So, I want to know what made you decide now's the time for arms? With all these movements going on, what was the final thing for you that made you think "I can no longer sit on the sideline" during this?

James Kilgore: Well, really for me it was more just the rage and wanting to fight back against the force that had killed the people in LA. I don't think we had a detailed political strategy. It was more like, "This is too much." I have to do something to help these people. And it kind of spun a little out of control, to be honest. We didn't really have a tight organization. I think it's important to recognize that the Patty Hearst kidnapping was a lead story on the national news almost every night. Some of these newscasts would lead with "Day 73 of the Captivity of Patricia Hearst." It was a probably one of the most intense person hunts in FBI history, and we're sitting there with almost no resources and no money, trying to figure out how are we going to escape this, and how are we going to fight back. We were really in a pretty desperate situation, and we couldn't just go knocking on people's doors, saying, "Hey, can you help us with a little food?" or something. It was very scary, very dangerous.

Eric King: For people that are listening in, I think the equivalent today

Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson. On August 7, 1970, George Jackson's 17-year-old brother Jonathan Jackson burst into a Marin County courtroom with an automatic weapon, freed prisoners three prisoners, including Ruchell Magee, and took a judge, district attorney, and three jurors hostage to demand the release of the Soledad Brothers. Police killed Jonathan, the judge, and wounded three others in the ensuing chase. On August 21, 1971, George pulled a 9 mm pistol from beneath a wig and said: "Gentlemen, the dragon has come," quoting Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, and ordered prisoners' cells opened, escaped to the yard, and was murdered by a guard from a guard tower. George finished writing the book *Blood in My Eye*, which was published in 1972, just days before his escape and death. *Blood in My Eye* is a masterpiece of urban guerrilla theory, political economy, and theories of armed Black liberation.

Pelican Bay Hunger Strike — in July 2013 up to 30,000 prisoners in California engaged in a two month hunger strike to protest solitary confinement, organized across racial and gang lines by prisoners in solitary.

were sold by an undercover FBI agent and four years later, Diana and Claude discovered a FBI surveillance device underneath their car. Diana had just given birth to a child and the discovery prompted the entire group to change location and identity. Claude and Diana worked in the anti-imperialist underground for several decades, primarily in support of Puerto Rican political prisoners and with the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee. Claude spent time as a political prisoner and has since founded the Freedom Archive, which compiles information about the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements.

Donna Willmott — in 1969, Donna traveled to Cuba as part of the first contingent of the Venceremos Brigades. Donna worked with numerous groups to implement revolutionary change and was supportive of political prisoners before her own arrest. In 1985, Donna and others were arrested in connection with a planned escape attempt of Puerto Rican political prisoner Oscar López Rivera. In 1994, after spending nine years underground, she and her codefendant turned themselves in, and Donna subsequently served twenty-seven months in prison at MCC Chicago and FCI Dublin, followed by six months in a halfway house in San Francisco. Since her release, she has worked tirelessly to abolish solitary confinement and ensure that younger generations continue efforts for radical change. She is a mentor with the Anne Braden Anti-Racist Organizer Training Program and a member of the Catalyst Action Fund, which promotes racial justice through elections and civic engagement.

Battle of Seattle — a peak of the anti-globalization movement, when tens of thousands of protestors would successfully prevent a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle from November 30—December 3, 1999. The protests are iconic for, among other reasons, the anarchist black bloc, trade unions, and other left coalitions fighting against the police, overwhelming and putting them on the defensive in the city.

George Jackson — a revolutionary prisoner and Minister of Defense for the Black Panther Party. During his first years at San Quentin State Prison, where he was imprisoned at age 20 for stealing $70 from a gas station on a sentence of one year to life, George became involved in revolutionary activity, after becoming acquainted with the works of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Fanon. On January 17, 1970, a prison officer shot and killed three Black prisoners during a set-up fight with members of the Aryan Brotherhood. Following their assassinations, thirteen black prisoners began a hunger strike in the hopes of securing an investigation. A grand jury was convened three days later that exonerated the prison guard after permitting no black prisoners to testify. Thirty minutes after the grand jury decision, another prison guard was thrown off a cell-block tier to his death, and George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette—who came to be known as the Soledad Brothers—were indicted. Many revolutionaries would join the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, such as Angela Davis who would become the leader of the committee and friend to George who sent her the book

would be like if Paris Hilton got kidnapped by a revolutionary group. Just a really famous heiress. Would that be about right?

James Kilgore: Yeah.

Eric King: For people that don't know, can you explain why, especially in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, bank expropriations were so common and so necessary?

James Kilgore: I think what we need to say is that people, particularly because of the war in Vietnam, people who were really committed to ending that war felt a need to take up arms in solidarity with the liberation fighters in Vietnam. There were different schools of thought about how to end the war in Vietnam. Some people wanted to do more pacifist things and also just campaign to bring the troops home from Vietnam. But other people felt that the Vietnam War was part of a much bigger structure of US imperialism and that we either needed to fight back against that by building a stronger anti-imperialist network or making the same level of commitment that we saw the Vietnamese people making, putting their lives on the line to fight against US imperialism.

For those people who were involved in military action in solidarity with the Vietnamese freedom fighters, it wasn't so easy to survive economically. A lot of times people resorted to robberies in order to survive. I think we also kind of copycatted a little bit some of the guerrilla movements of Latin America that survived through what they call expropriations, particularly the Tupamaros of Uruguay and also the Revolutionary Army of Argentina. There was a whole international network of guerrilla-focused liberation forces that believed that this was a moment to fight back against US imperialism and that armed struggle was the way to do that.

Eric King: I love that. Something you mentioned was that when you saw your comrades killed by the police it was just too much. That's what happened with me, as well, to where, when I saw the cops kill Michael Brown, the young Black man in Ferguson, Missouri, I was like, "This is enough. This is enough." And so I did my action, and I was underground for a grand total of six days before I was arrested [*by cops*] with multiple machine guns. Obviously I can't dig into all the details, but I'd really like to know how you even started underground, and then how it lasts for

almost three decades.

James Kilgore: Well, I think it's important to recognize that the world was very different in 1975. There was no internet. In the US, it was fairly easy for someone, particularly a white person—and I was an educated white person, so I can pass as a respectable person when I needed to—it was pretty easy to move from one part of the country to another and just kind of disappear. Just to give you an idea, I spent a small portion of that time living in Wisconsin. Wisconsin did not have pictures on their driver's licenses, let alone facial recognition, let alone all the other stuff that we have to contend with now. It was never really very difficult, particularly for an educated white person to slip into the cracks of the system, because they didn't have a way of tracking people from one state to another. There was no national database of driver's license or IDs. They had no way of taking your picture and comparing it to everybody else that was in their database.

When I left San Francisco, which is where my charges were out of, I moved to Seattle, and I stayed there for about a year and a half. But Seattle was still too close to San Francisco, so every once in a while, I'd be walking down the street or I'd be going somewhere, and I'd see somebody I knew from the Bay Area. I'd duck in and duck out of the way and they never saw me, but I realized if I'm going to do this in the long run I need to be farther away. So I moved to Milwaukee, and then after that we moved to Minneapolis. I stayed in Minneapolis from '77 to '82, which is where I really started to become involved as an activist. I was an aboveground activist doing solidarity work with the liberation struggles in southern Africa. I helped start an organization there called the Twin Cities Committee for the Liberation of Southern Africa. We worked closely with freedom fighters from Zimbabwe and from South Africa doing political education and raising material aid for refugees and guerrilla fighters in the camps in Mozambique.

Eric King: That's wild. One of the things I've always wondered—and I've spoken to others, like I spoke to David Gilbert about it, too—do you feel like back then during those time periods that there was more societal understanding about why the revolution was happening, why this uprising was happening, compared to now? Like to where the media was maybe more understanding, or the community was? Because it doesn't seem like the snitch culture existed back then like it does right now, to

armed struggle for national liberation against French settler-colonialism from 1954 to 1962. The FLN adopted tactics similar to those of national liberation guerrillas in Asia, and the French did not realize the seriousness of the challenge they faced until 1955, when the FLN moved from rural areas into urbanized areas. To increase international and domestic French attention to their struggle, the FLN decided to bring the conflict to the cities and to call a nationwide general strike and also to plant bombs. General Jacques Massu was instructed in response to use whatever methods deemed necessary to crush the revolt, and would encapsulate the French colonial response in torture, massacres, executions, and collective punishment. By 1956, there were more than 400,000 French troops in Algeria, while the FLN successfully applied hit-and-run tactics in accordance with guerrilla warfare theory. The FLN would successfully win national liberation and full independence from France in 1962.

Black Panther Party Algeria Office — after the revolutionary FLN defeated French colonial forces during their struggle for liberation, activists and liberation movements from around the world gathered in Algiers, including contingents from the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the African National Congress (ANC), and the Black Panther Party. Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, the first Black Panthers in Algeria, helped to set up a local headquarters that would soon welcome Donald Cox, Sekou Odinga, and Larry Mack, as the Black Panther Party would embrace international revolutionary struggles, Black and Arab alike. Multiple American radicals hijacked planes to Algeria for safety with the BPP office. After splits among the Party, the office gradually ceased to exist.

Huey P. Newton — a Black revolutionary who co-founded the Black Panther Party with Bobby Seale in 1966. Huey ran the party as its first leader and helped to craft its ten-point manifesto with Bobby. With Huey's leadership, the Black Panther Party founded over 60 survival programs including food banks, medical clinics, sickle cell anemia tests, prison busing for families of prisoners, legal advice seminars, clothing banks, housing cooperatives, and their own ambulance service. Huey also co-founded the Black Panther newspaper. In 1967, he was involved in a shootout which led to the death of police officer and injuries to himself and another police officer. In 1968, he was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to 2 to 15 years in prison, but in May 1970, the conviction was reversed and after an international campaign to "Free Huey" and two subsequent trials ended in hung juries, the charges were dropped. *Revolutionary Suicide*, Huey's autobiography, was published in 1973. Huey was murdered on August 22, 1989.

Claude Marks — Claude and his wife Diana Block were involved in the anti-imperialist Prairie Fire Organizing Committee. In 1981, Diana moved to Los Angeles and went underground as part of a militant group which used its white privilege to buy explosives to be used in freeing Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueña (FALN) prisoner Oscar López Rivera. The explosives

the Certain Days Collective, and he also helped pioneer AIDS awareness programs that saved thousands of lives in prisons across the country. David wrote numerous zines, including *Our Commitment Is to Our Communities: Mass Incarceration, Political Prisoners and Building a Movement for Community-Based Justice*. He also wrote three books, *No Surrender: Writings from an Anti-Imperialist Political Prisoner* (2004); *Love and Struggle: My Life in SDS, the Weather Underground, and Beyond* (2012); and *Looking at the U.S. White Working Class Historically* (2017). David is also a contributor to *Rattling the Cages: An Oral History of North American Political Prisoners*.

Che Guevara — an Argentine Marxist revolutionary, physician, author, guerrilla leader, diplomat, military theorist, and leader in the Cuban revolution. Che interspersed his college training in medicine with motorcycle travels around South America, including Guatemala during the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup, where his close contact with exploitation would solidify his communist beliefs in armed struggle and revolution. Che met Raúl and Fidel Castro while exiled in Mexico City, joined their 26th of July Movement, and sailed to Cuba aboard the yacht Granma with the intention of overthrowing US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. Che became an integral part of the rebel army and was appointed to second in command during the guerrilla war of liberation to defeat the US-supported Batista regime. After the revolution, Che was involved with revolutionary tribunals, instituting agrarian land reform as minister of industries, helping spearhead a successful nationwide literacy campaign, serving as both president of the National Bank and instructional director for Cuba's armed forces, and traversing the globe as a diplomat on behalf of Cuban socialism. He composed a seminal guerrilla warfare manual, numerous diaries, and theories of imperialism and colonialism. Che left Cuba in 1965 to foment continental revolutions across both Africa and South America, first in the Congo and later in Bolivia, where he was captured by CIA-assisted Bolivian forces and summarily executed.

Frantz Fanon — a revolutionary political philosopher, and Marxist from the French colony of Martinique. His works have become influential in the fields of post-colonial studies, critical theory, and Marxism. As well as being an intellectual, Fanon was a political radical Pan-Africanist and Marxist concerned with the psychopathology of colonization and the human, social, and cultural consequences of decolonization. In the course of his work as a physician and psychiatrist, Fanon supported the Algerian War of independence from France and was a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front. With his health declining, Fanon's comrades urged him to seek treatment in the US as his Soviet doctors had suggested. The CIA likely had a role in his death of pneumonia. His works *Black Skin, White Masks*, *A Dying Colonialism,* and *The Wretched of the Earth* are still read to this day by revolutionaries around the world.

Algeria freedom fighters — the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) led an

where everyone's just dying to tell on someone. Would you say that adds up, or am I just misreading things?

James Kilgore: Yeah, I think that probably adds up. I mean, one of the things that I've been focusing on a lot—I'm actually doing a research project on this at the moment—is that I think the movement at that time had a much stronger sense of international solidarity. For example, we all read Che [Guevara], we read [Frantz] Fanon, we read international writers, and we had a common intellectual culture and understanding. We knew about the freedom fighters in Mozambique. We knew about freedom fighters in Algeria. We knew about the organizations in Latin America. That was just kind of common to the left culture of the day, whether you were a guerrilla fighter or an aboveground organizer. It was just part of how you developed a political consciousness.

Maybe the Vietnam War triggered that internationalist consciousness, but nonetheless it was very powerful and almost universal. Now, today, we don't really see that, or it's certainly marginalized. I mean, I've interviewed a number of younger activists about who do they look to as theoretical guidance, or is there anybody outside the United States that they connect to as somebody that has something to inform them about. And what I usually find is a blank face, that it hasn't occurred to them that maybe people in southern Africa, maybe people in Asia, maybe people in Europe, have political theories and political lessons that we could learn from. I'm not saying that's universal, because there are certain sectors of the movement that are more internationalist than others, particularly people that are dealing with the climate catastrophe.

But it's not even in abolitionist circles. I've found that abolitionists are not very internationalist overall. Sure, once again, there's exceptions to that situation, but they're not really thinking on a global context, and a lot of stuff becomes very localized. When we're dealing with a system of global capitalism, global imperialism, it's not enough to have mutual aid in your neighborhood. It's just not enough. We have to find ways to be making ties to people outside the US and building with them in other ways. That, for me, is part of the movement of back in the day. I've been interviewing a lot of people that were active in different ways back in the '70s and even '80s, and all of them have that internationalist consciousness. But they also recognize that it's not so prevalent today as it was. Take the Black Panther Party, for example. They had an international chapter in Algeria.

They had an internationalist perspective. Huey Newton had this thing, rightly or wrongly, he had this thing called intercommunalism, which was a way of talking about how imperialism functioned at a global level. These were things, even organizations, that you might not associate with internationalism, that we really thought a lot about.

Eric King: I just did a talk in Oakland with Claude [Marks] and Donna [Willmott] and they could not say a single sentence without bringing up someone in Cuba, Palestine, Vietnam. Still that structure is there. Do you see any connections or any similarities between the Palestinian solidarity movement today and Vietnamese solidarity back then, or is it just completely different?

James Kilgore: Well, look, the movements that have emerged in solidarity with Palestine, they're amazing, and it's a wonderful development to see. I think it's a little bit early to decide what the impact of those movements is going to be. We don't know what the impact of those movements is going to be on the situation in Palestine, because, so far, despite all the things we've done, Netanyahu, Biden, etc., they're not moving on this shit. They're not prepared to compromise. But, I mean, we fought the Vietnam War with the same result for years and years and years. I think one of the key differences between the two movements is that in Vietnam we had US troops fighting and we had US troops dying, so that provided leverage for people here to get involved, because they didn't want their children or themselves to be sent off to Vietnam to die.

And you have to remember that beginning in 1965 the US had a military draft, so everybody that was over 18 had to register for the draft, and then it was like luck of the draw whether you got chosen or not. But President Nixon, in 1971 I believe it was, switched from the draft to the lottery, so everybody that was of draft age, your birthday got a lottery. You got rated from 1 to 365, so if you were 1 to 100 you were pretty likely to get brought into the military. If you were 100 to 175, you were kind of 50/50. And if you're over 175, you're out of the picture. What that did is it demobilized part of the antiwar movement because those people that had high lottery numbers, they didn't have to worry about it anymore, and their families didn't have to worry about it anymore. That was a big thing in terms of demobilizing the antiwar movement.

Now, of course, we don't have anything like that here, and we don't have

Zimbabwe freedom fighters — Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), initiated guerrilla operations against the British settler-colony Rhodesia's predominantly white government. ZAPU was supported by the Soviet Union and associated nations such as Cuba, and adopted a Marxist-Leninist ideology; ZANU meanwhile aligned itself with Maoism and the bloc headed by the People's Republic of China. ZAPU and ZANU ultimately would win independence after a 15-year guerrilla war, after which Rhodesia would become Zimbabwe.

South Africa freedom fighters — among the freedom fighters struggling against apartheid was the African National Congress (ANC) guerrilla organization uMkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), co-founded in association with the South African Communist Party (SACP) by Nelson Mandela in 1961 that led a sabotage and guerrilla campaign against the apartheid government until 1987. The ANC's armed wing would also be involved in other national liberation struggles in southern Africa. In 1969 the ANC declared its solidarity with the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and pursued close military relations with that party, then became involved in the Angolan War of Independence. The MPLA and ANC entered into a formal military alliance together with the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), known as the Khartoum alliance. MK was also closely allied with the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the armed wing of ZAPU during the national liberation struggle in then Rhodesia.

Mozambique guerrillas — Portugal fought a long and bitter counter-insurgency in its three primary African colonies—Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau—from the 1960s to the mid-1970s. In Mozambique, the armed struggle against colonial rule was spearheaded by the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO). FRELIMO guerrillas initially received training primarily in North Africa and the Middle East in countries such as Algeria, with the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China providing military equipment. On 25 June 1975 Mozambique formally gained independence from Portugal, with FRELIMO Leader Samora Machel becoming President of the People's Republic of Mozambique. The downfall of Portuguese colonial rule gave hope to Black liberation, pan-African, and revolutionary socialist struggles throughout the world. As President Machel put it in a speech in 1975: "The struggle in Zimbabwe is our struggle."

David Gilbert — a lifelong anti-imperialist who was captured and imprisoned as a result of an attempted expropriation of a Brinks truck in Nyack, New York, in 1981. He was sentenced to seventy-five years to life but his sentence was commuted by outgoing Governor Cuomo, and he was released from prison after nearly forty years in November 2021. While in prison, David was a cofounder of

People, Places, Events, & Organizations

Revolutionary Army — a militant Bay Area underground group founded in the early 1970s by Willie Brandt, Wendy Yoshimura, and others. They planted bombs and planned other actions to protest the Vietnam War, and members sometimes worked in solidarity with the SLA.

Tupamaros — (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional — Tupamaros, MLN-T / National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros) — a Marxist-Leninist urban guerrilla group in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s. The Tupamaro movement was named after the revolutionary Túpac Amaru II, who in 1780 led a major indigenous revolt against the Viceroyalty of Peru. Its origins lie in the union between the Movimiento de Apoyo al Campesino (Peasant Support Movement), members of trade unions in poverty-stricken rural zones, and radicalized cells of the Socialist Party of Uruguay. The movement began by staging the robbing of banks, gun clubs, and other businesses in the early 1960s, then distributing stolen food and money among the poor in Montevideo. It took as its slogan, "Words divide us; action unites us." The Tupamaros collapsed in mid-1972, with the army killing many of them and capturing a majority of the rest. After defeating the MLN the military completed a coup on 1973. In 1984, several Uruguayan general strikes eventually overcame the military junta, with democratic elections held that year. Under the new president, amnesty was granted to the Tupamaros, who were released from prison after over a decade and they joined in representing the Frente Amplio coalition party.

People's Revolutionary Army — Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo — the military branch of the communist Workers' Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores, PRT) in Argentina. The ERP was founded as the armed wing of the PRT, a communist party emerging from the Trotskyist tradition, but soon turned to the Maoist theory, especially the Cultural Revolution. During the 1960s, the PRT adopted the foquista strategy of guerilla warfare associated with Che Guevara, who had fought alongside Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution. The ERP launched its guerrilla campaign against the Argentine military dictatorship headed by Juan Carlos Onganía in 1969, using targeted urban guerrilla warfare methods such as assassinations and kidnappings of government officials and foreign imperialists. In 1976 there had been plans to send a large part of the Uruguayan Tupamaros (MLN-T), the Chilean Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) and the Bolivian National Liberation Army (ELN) to fight alongside the ERP and Montoneros in Argentina, but the plans failed to materialize largely due to the military coup, after which the Argentine armed forces moved ahead with the "Dirty War." Up to 30,000 people are estimated to have disappeared and been killed during the military dictatorship.

people from the US getting sent off to the West Bank and getting killed. So I don't know what will happen with the solidarity movement. I mean, I do know that we've seen some pretty big mobilizations around global issues in the last two and a half decades, beginning with the anti-WTO movement, the Battle in Seattle in 1999, we had tens of thousands of people involved in this, and then all of a sudden it disappeared. Same thing happened with Occupy. It disappeared. We never built a sustainable structure to turn that into a movement or an organization that could fight imperialism. People just went back into their normal lives after a certain period of time, and I think some of that has also happened with Black Lives Matter, with the murder of Black people by the police. I mean, where is that movement now? Where's the structure?

I've been doing a lot of research lately trying to compare internationalism from the '60s, '70s, and even early '80s, as compared to what we've seen since the year 2000. For me, I mean one of the things that is a constant source of wonder, a constant source of concern, is what kind of organizations are we building. One of the things that's been important in looking at that history has been the disappearance of the Soviet Union. Now, I was never a big supporter of the Soviet Union. I was not a Stalinist, I was not a Khrushchevian, or anything like that. I didn't like the brand of socialism that the Soviet Union had and that they marketed. But the Soviet Union was a big supporter of national liberation forces, for good reasons and bad reasons. But nonetheless, virtually all the national liberation struggles from Vietnam to Southern Africa to Central America all relied on the Soviet Union for a certain level of material and ideological support.

They also provided an opportunity for national liberation movements to play one super power off against another. If they didn't like what they were getting from the US they could go to the Soviet Union. If they didn't like what they got from the Soviet Union they could go to the US. And both of those super powers were vying to be able to have some hegemony over these national liberation movements, and also influence the way in which they ruled once they took power. Now, when the Soviet Union collapsed once and for all in 1991, all of a sudden we had one super power. We didn't really have another force in the world that could counter in some way the US. I think it also impacted the ability of activists to imagine something other than US imperialism existing.

For me, I grew up politically in the Cold War era, and I always knew it was possible to do something different than what the US did, and what I had to see was the Soviet Union. I go, "Well that's not so great, but that shows maybe we could do something different." But once the Soviet Union disappeared, then we didn't really have another kind of universe that we could relate to in order to see how we build yet another universe that's better than the Soviet Union that's not US imperialism. For me, that's an interesting kind of historical component of the issues that we're talking about. I don't know if that makes sense.

Eric King: James, you go underground, and at some point you get offered to go to Africa to teach, right?

James Kilgore: Correct. I was living in Minneapolis, working with people from Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, and some of the Zimbabweans that were there offered to help me go to Zimbabwe and become a teacher. But they also were aware of my situation, and so it was an act of solidarity on their part, as well. That was in 1982. Also interesting, the challenges of getting a passport were a little bit different there, too. You could still use the dead baby approach, so I went to Iowa, I believe, and I went into a library and read old newspapers. What I was looking for is a child that died less than age three or four but also that was born in a state that was different than where they died. They had state level records, so they could check to see if somebody died in that state, but they couldn't check to see if you died in a neighboring state.

Eric King: I have always wondered this, too. That's so neat. When you're underground I assume there's always the risk of arrest or attack. Did that ever feel like its own mental prison or were you just prepared and ready, like happy to live life?

James Kilgore: Well, there were a few moments of panic where something would happen, like the police would visit somebody back in California or something would happen. At one point, they were talking about calling the grand jury and pulling my parents in front of the grand jury, so there were moments like that. But overall—and once again there's an awful lot of white-skinned privilege involved in this—it was pretty easy for me to blend in. At that point it was pretty easy for me to get employed, it was pretty easy for me to get hired as a contractor—I did house painting, for example. It wasn't that survival was challenging, but it wasn't that

I think we've hit the end of the slide deck. Thank you so much, Libertie, I really appreciate you taking the time to do that. And I appreciate very much the people that have stayed on for an extra 15 minutes to just see that. I really wanted Vic's work to be highlighted. I didn't know Vic before we started this book. In fact, Vic emailed me and said she'd read my other mass incarceration books, and said she liked the graphics and she would like to make a graphic version of this. I kindly said, "No, I don't really want another book." But she convinced me, and I think she's done an amazing job. She's just so creative and thoughtful, and she's so respectful of the incarcerated population that she's drawing or somehow portraying with her artwork. It's been a great pleasure. We worked on this for three years before we even met in person, but we just did everything from Zoom and it was quite an amazing experience. I'm just real sorry that she's not here. Maybe she's on, I don't know.

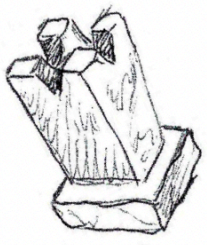
Eric King: Before we go, I just want to remind everyone to please write a prisoner, please support a prisoner. Randy Platt is my best friend inside. He's still in the ADX, and he'll be there for 14 years. Please write him. Please do whatever you can to build relationships with people inside. This wouldn't have happened if Josh Davidson didn't build a relationship with me inside that developed into a book that developed into a web series now with Libertie. Please, please take prisoners serious, and please take their dignity and life seriously. James, thank you so much. It was really fucking awesome meeting you, dude.

James Kilgore: It was great talking to you, Eric. I appreciate you and appreciate all your work and all your fighting spirit. Let's keep it moving.

Eric King: Oh, yeah. Thank you.

Libertie Valance: Thank you so much. It's been an incredible conversation. I'm sorry that we didn't have Vic here, but so glad that we got to look at the book. Just a reminder to folks, if they haven't picked it up, both these books are worth grabbing and worth reading, *Rattling the Cages* and *The Warehouse*. It's been an incredible evening. Thank you all, and I hope that we get to meet in person someday.

Eric King: Absolutely. Bye bye!



Chess pieces
Toilet paper and water
Pencil diagrams by Angelo, an incarcerated artist, printed in Prisoners' Inventions.

Chess

Angelo's former celly (cellmate), Ron, made papier-mâché chess pieces. He "turned out exquisite sets just as fast as the cops could confiscate them. Each set became more elaborate and beautiful—his reasoning being: 'It's the cops' job to keep us down, and ours to show them that they can't.'"[120]

During COVID, social-distancing measures not only forced incarcerated people to often spend 23 hours a day in their cells, but also resulted in the ban of board games, allegedly in the effort to reduce contagion. Harlin Pierce, incarcerated in Texas, and his friend Wally were forced to once again innovate how they played chess in order to maintain their sanity. They began playing chess entirely mentally, without the game board or pieces at all, by shouting the moves of each piece to the grid location, playing the game across the cells and entirely in their minds. In order to make sure they were heard correctly over the din of prison, they created their own phonetic alphabet, shouting, "Bishop to Dinosaur 4" and "Knight captures on Elephant 7!"

Eric King: Out of everything! It's crazy. I've seen chess pieces made out of toilet paper, and they're hard as rock.

James Kilgore: Exactly. All these things and all that stuff is about making your time a little bit more bearable. Once again we come back to abolition purism. Is there something wrong with people doing that? No. It's all about building as much power as you can build in the situation that you're in.

difficult for me. I also didn't have any serious physical disabilities that limited my ability to move or my ability to do certain kinds of work.

For the longest period of time after I got out of Seattle—really for the next 20 years—it wasn't that horrific. It wasn't like I was waking up every day and looking out the window to see if the cops were there. Okay, it was like that for the first year or so, because you're still new, and also because the case itself was in the media a lot. There was always a concern that your picture might pop up in the paper or something.

Eric King: I often feel like I was born a little too late. My goodness. So, after, I guess, a decade in Africa, give or take, you end up getting arrested by the African authorities and put in an African jail or prison. Can you talk about how that arrest happened and what the situation was like in the African prison as well?

James Kilgore: I was actually in southern Africa for 18 years. 11 years in South Africa, seven years in Zimbabwe. I was trying to have some calls with lawyers and maybe making some kind of a deal or something, and I think they just tapped one of the phone calls. But I still don't really know how I got caught. One of the things that happened was that the day before I got arrested, two people came to my front door, a white man and white woman, and they said they were marketing a new line of wine. They had two bottles there, and they wanted me to tell them which one of those bottles I thought had a better design. What they did is they handed me the bottle, and the minute they handed me the bottle, I thought to myself, "These guys are taking my fingerprints." I tried to take the bottle, and I took my shirttail, and I tried to rub the fingerprints off, and do all that kind of stuff. But by that time, if they got to my front door, it was all done.

The next day, I drove my seven-year-old son home from cricket practice, because he used to play cricket—that's what they play in South Africa. When I got out the car, a couple guys came charging out of the bushes from across the street, and that was that. But I will say this, that because I was a high-profile white international fugitive, I got treated pretty softly. They actually told me later that they didn't want to put handcuffs on me in front of my children. Now, that doesn't happen in the US, I can tell you that.

Eric King: Right! Do you feel like you benefited from white privilege inside

an African prison? Or was it media privilege, like pristine privilege?

James Kilgore: Probably a little bit of both. But because I was a high-profile international person basically, I was kept in a medical unit, and it was okay.

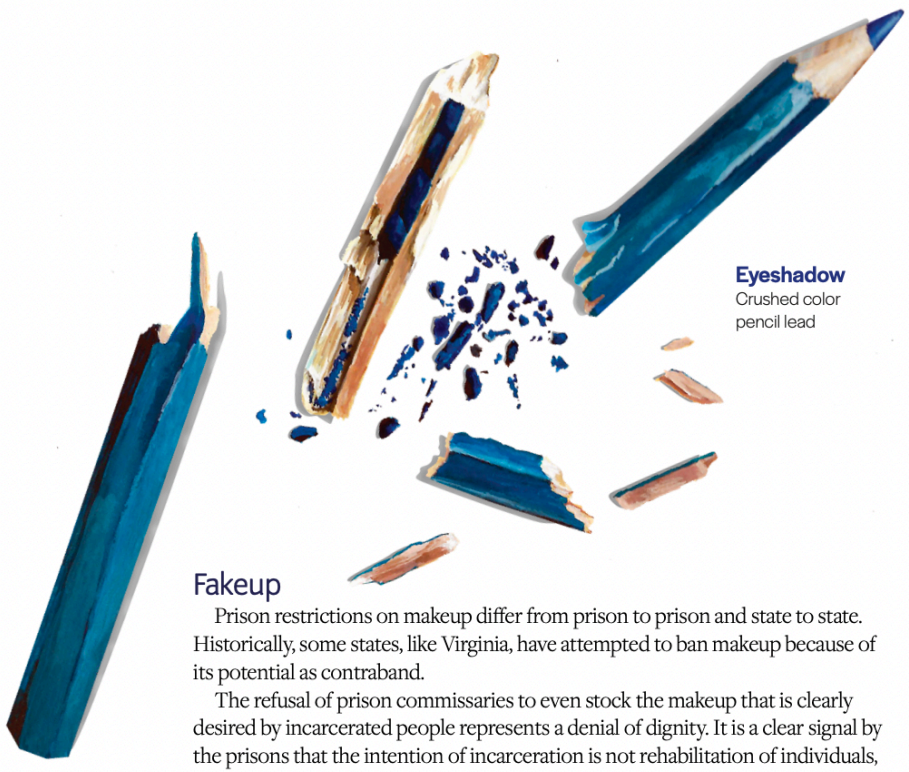
Eric King: How was the food?

James Kilgore: The food was shit. It's terrible. It was way worse. You get beets every meal, beets the super food, hot beets. They'd lock you up about 4 or 5 pm for the night, and they'd give you about five slices of white bread. They had something that you could put on the bread, which I still never quite figured out what it was. It wasn't butter, wasn't margarine, and it wasn't shortening, but it was something in that family. It was a distant relative. But you know, you eat what you have because you know that's got to last you for 15 hours until you get breakfast. And for breakfast you get a hot porridge and some more bread. For lunch you got cabbage or beets and some little scraps of meat. Yeah, the food was worse than I got in any US prison.

But I'll just say this: The prison population in South Africa, they liked me. I was a freedom fighter to them.

Eric King: And to us. I've been wildly interested in this. When you hear about people that get arrested overseas and they're brought back to the States, what was the plane situation like? How were you flown, was it a military jet, was it United Airlines, what was that situation like?

James Kilgore: They put me on a commercial flight, basically just in wrist shackles, and then they had some kind of a jacket that they put on me that covered up the shackles. Then there was an FBI agent that sat next to me, this woman that had been tracking my case for 15 years or something, and she kept asking me all kinds of questions. Which I kept not answering. Then there was another, I'm trying to remember, he wasn't FBI, I can't remember what he was. Some US global police guy who was on there. There was another woman who was also being flown back at the same time. I remember it was a female prisoner, so she was being flown back at the same time. She was from Oregon, and I didn't know her, but what I remember the most about the flight was that she said, "Well, I'm going to do you a big favor and I'm going to let you use the silverware." That was



Eyeshadow
Crushed color pencil lead

Fakeup

Prison restrictions on makeup differ from prison to prison and state to state. Historically, some states, like Virginia, have attempted to ban makeup because of its potential as contraband.

The refusal of prison commissaries to even stock the makeup that is clearly desired by incarcerated people represents a denial of dignity. It is a clear signal by the prisons that the intention of incarceration is not rehabilitation of individuals, but rather retribution and punishment.

It is emotionally difficult and disorienting to be stripped of the tools people rely on to express their identity. While some might find eyeshadow or lipstick frivolous, makeup is an extremely powerful tool for self-identity and sometimes gender affirmation. Prison commissary makeup selection is extremely limited, forcing people to improvise and innovate alternatives to put their self-image together.

Michelle, a woman incarcerated in California, explains, "She gave me colored pencils for my eyeliner, and calamine lotion mixed with coffee grounds for foundation. When your makeup's good and your hair's on point, you feel and act differently; you come to the table stronger because you have your groove on, you're feeling it. It builds up your confidence."[118]

Joyce Pequeño, a 28-year-old woman incarcerated in Oregon, applies makeup every day in prison. She explains, "It makes me feel good, like a real human being—not just a number."[119]

James Kilgore: We have all these books that give us all these statistics on mass incarceration, but what about the daily resistance of people who are incarcerated? How do we show that? We really put a big emphasis on that in this book, trying to get that balance.

Here we go. This is another example where people, particularly women, make makeup using various materials, like lipstick. Then people make chess pieces out of various things.

As Harlin explained, "While we have been forced to relinquish our physical freedom, we don't have to give up control over our minds."[121]

Lip stain
A bit of hot water and red M&M's

the last time I used a metal fork for the next few years.

Eric King: What about if you had to use the restroom?

James Kilgore: They just stand up with you and put the jacket over your arms, and then they'd stand outside the door.

Eric King: When you land in the States you get found guilty. Your first pre-trial spot, was that a federal pre-trial spot?

James Kilgore: Yeah, Dublin.

Eric King: Oh, you were held at Dublin? Was it a men's prison back then?

James Kilgore: There was always a pre-trial spot in Dublin for men.

Eric King: Oh, I didn't know that.

James Kilgore: We could actually look out the window and see the women.

Eric King: When you're in pre-trial, because I assume it was still a high-profile case, were you allowed to be in general population or did they just dump you in the SHU?

James Kilgore: I was in general population.

Eric King: Okay, and were you able to see your lawyer and try to fight your case?

James Kilgore: Yeah, I mean, basically there was already a deal that had been cooked up.

Eric King: Oh, okay. Someone asked a question on the webinar chat, and I think it's really relevant. When you were arrested, was there ever a chance of you staying in South Africa? Did they have to send you to the US, or could they have said no?

James Kilgore: They could have, but they had just recently signed an extradition treaty with the US, so that kind of, yeah...

Eric King: That was really a possibility, then. So, you're in Dublin. You're fighting your case. You already have your situation set up, like the deal set up...

James Kilgore: It took 19 months to get the thing finalized.

Eric King: When you were there in Dublin how did that compare, like the pre-trial, to the South African pre-trial or South African jail?

James Kilgore: Oh, Dublin was like paradise. Dublin was a soft place. I mean, you didn't really have a big yard or anything, but it was a soft place.

Eric King: Then they move you to Lompoc?

James Kilgore: Yeah.

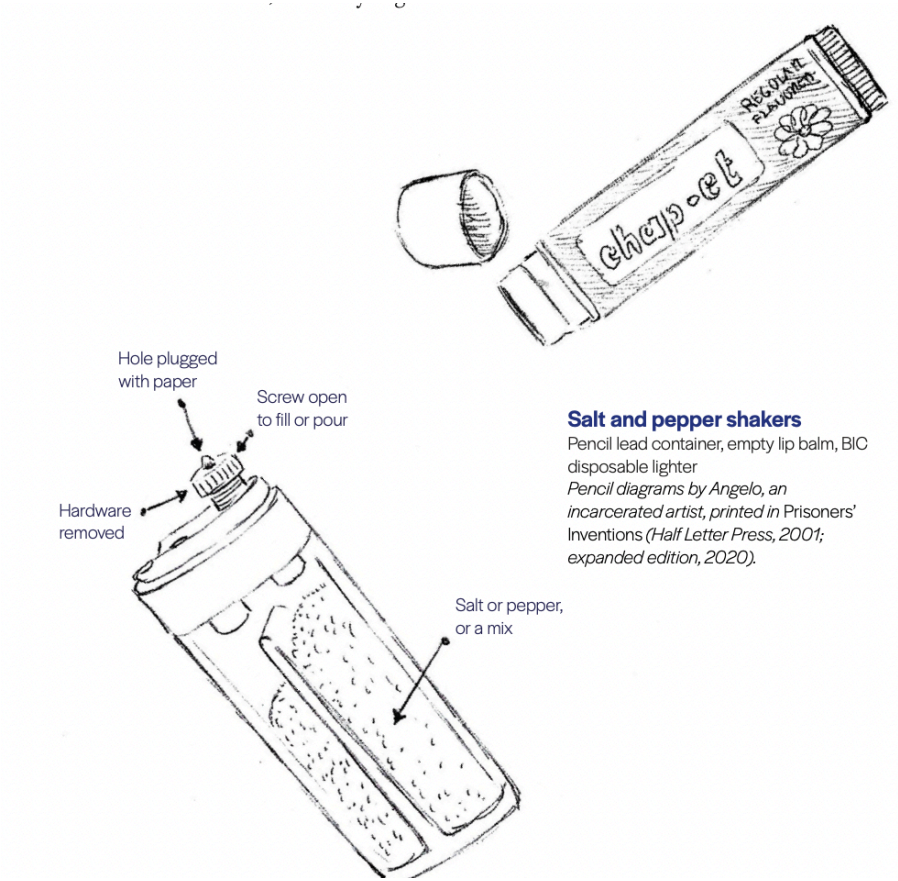
Eric King: Can you tell me about what that felt to you? You'd supported people in prison in the past, you were part of a revolutionary movement where hundreds of you were getting locked up, so how did you feel when you were actually like, "I am going to prison?" Then, when you actually got on the yard, did that go away, did the feelings you had or the expectations you had match what you had thought was going to happen?

James Kilgore: I didn't really have an idea what prison would be like. My idea of prison was having read the prison letters of George Jackson and shit, so when I landed in prison I expected... Because I haven't been in the US for 20 years, I didn't really know what political consciousness existed in the US. I had been back a couple times, but I never really interacted with folks, so I didn't really have a clue about the ways in which people just dealt with stuff on a day-to-day basis. I have to say that I was pretty shocked at the low level of political awareness of people. I mean, this was like 20 plus years since my stuff happened, and a lot of them didn't know much about where I came from or anything. It just didn't register with them. I remember a couple people came up to me and thanked me for the food that the SLA gave their family.

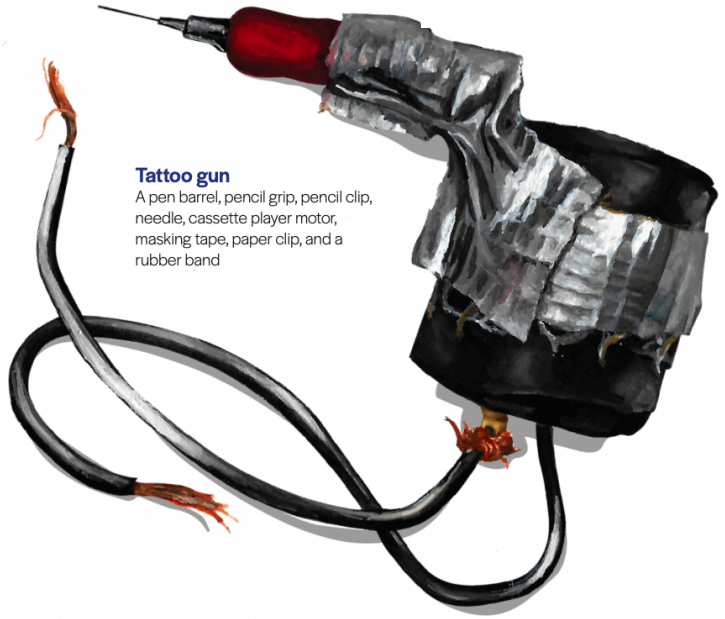
Eric King: Oh, that's awesome.

James Kilgore: But other than that there wasn't a lot. I just had to take it as it came. Now, I'll say that experience in the feds—Lompoc is a medium—

Eric King: When I was in the SHU at McCreary, at that time we were still allowed radios. They've taken that away since then, but my cellie would buy broken ones from people and strip the wires off, the rubber stuff off the wires, and take magnets and make an antenna so that we could get radio stations from Nashville and Memphis. I felt like we were stealing radio time, like we were stealing air, and it felt like such an act of resistance. I love that you put that in, and that you included it. That's so serious.



Salt and pepper shakers
Pencil lead container, empty lip balm, BIC disposable lighter
Pencil diagrams by Angelo, an incarcerated artist, printed in Prisoners' Inventions *(Half Letter Press, 2001; expanded edition, 2020).*



Tattoo gun
A pen barrel, pencil grip, pencil clip, needle, cassette player motor, masking tape, paper clip, and a rubber band

Tattoos

People get tattoos in prison for many reasons. Tattoos can signal what group you belong to and your status in the group. But often, people get tattoos in prison for similar reasons as people get tattoos outside of prison.

"Some people want to look the part, some people actually do get them to illustrate their life story and some probably get them just because it's against the rules to get them done," Dan Grote, a formerly incarcerated prison teacher, said. "Not too different from in the world."[117]

Tattoos of girlfriend's names and wedding bands are just as common as tattoos signaling power or notoriety. They can become a powerful anchor of identity in a system that seeks to erase individuality.

I'm sure, Eric, you're familiar with all these technologies that people take for granted in prison. But this is a form of resistance that we need to be talking about. When people make pruno [*prison wine*], that's resistance. When people smuggle in a cell phone, it's resistance. They're not trying to call shots and call hits, they're trying to communicate with their family when the system is trying to make them pay outrageous fees to make a phone call.

was way, way easier than the state.

Eric King: We're going to get to that. I've never been to a California federal prison, but you hear people talk. Were the racial dynamics — even though they might not have been as aggressive as Cali State, it's still a Cali prison — were they still as enforced in the medium or did you have more leeway?

James Kilgore: No, it was very loose. I could basically associate with anybody I wanted to associate with.

Eric King: Really?

James Kilgore: Yeah. I mean, now it certainly isn't that way in the state, but I used to play tennis with Black friends, I walked the track with them, I'd hang out with them, play chess, do all that. The only thing that was segregated was the chow hall, but other than that, space was not segregated. We had integrated basketball games. I mean, there were a lot that self-segregated, but I didn't do that. And nobody came up to me and said, "Hey, you better stop hanging out with those people." And I never once in the feds had any kind of a racial threat from somebody.

Eric King: I had about 7,000 racial threats.

James Kilgore: I'm sure. I know you did. I heard.

Eric King: So, when you land, it's been 20 years that you've been out of America, did you have a support team when you landed? When you got put in the feds, were people behind you? Were you getting letters and books and canteen?

James Kilgore: Yeah, I got a letter almost every day. I got so many letters. From my family, then I had a lot of people in South Africa who were sending me letters, a lot of my ex-friends from the States were sending me letters. They were sending in books. I was never short of books. My family was particularly strong. My partner and my mother-in-law, and my mother also. My mother, in 2002 my mother was 89, but she was still sharp, so she came. When I was in Dublin, she came every Sunday to visit. She visited every week, god bless her. She lived about an hour away maybe. She didn't drive, she had a wonderful friend that drove every week. My mother, she's about 4 foot [tall], and when she came to my first

court appearance a reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle came up and asked her some question about "What does it feel like to see your son here indicted for murder?" Blah, blah, blah. And my mother just looked at her and said, "Drop dead."

Eric King: Yes! I think my mom's watching right now, so I'm gonna say "Hello" to my mom, and I hope that she someday does the exact same thing if necessary. Something that I noticed that was really hurtful when I first got locked up was that people might support me, but they kind of treated my wife like shit. They treated her, I don't want to say like a secondary creature, but as if her trauma and her fears and all that was not real, wasn't valid. Did you feel as if your partner was respected and treated the way you thought they should be? Were they supported also?

James Kilgore: I think so. Because we had lived together in southern Africa for a long time, both of us had built up independent sets of friends and comrades. When I got arrested, people just rallied to her, to her support, I mean. And, see, our family, our children, they stayed in South Africa the whole time I was incarcerated. They didn't come back to the US. Why? Because we got treated with respect in South Africa. When I was arrested, the principal of my youngest son, and he was in third grade I believe, the principal sent a letter home to all the parents in the school saying, "Lonnie's father has just been arrested. Please show him love and support in this time of trauma."

Eric King: Jesus! That's amazing.

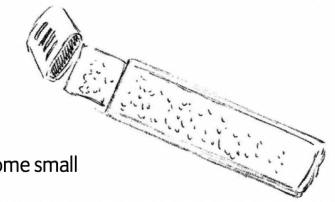
James Kilgore: That's why we did not want our children to come and live in the US, because we knew that they wouldn't get anything like that.

Eric King: That's incredible. I never even thought about that. So, you do approximately a year and a half, I believe, at Lompoc and then you go to the state, is that right?

James Kilgore: Yeah.

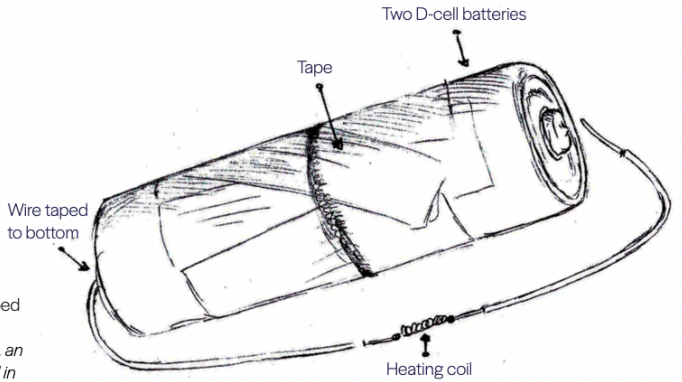
Eric King: Where do you first land when you hit Cali state prisons? Is that High Desert?

James Kilgore: No, DVI Tracy.



Prison Innovations

Improvisation and ingenuity can help bring some small human comforts into prison life.



Lighter
Two D-cell batteries, stripped wire, and tape
Pencil diagrams by Angelo, an incarcerated artist, printed in Prisoners' Inventions.

This is the other part when I'm talking about showing the daily life of prison, but also one of the things we want to emphasize here is the way in which people use whatever technology is available to them as a form of resistance to the system. It's not just people playing with stuff, it's people trying to assert their humanity in a very dehumanizing environment. For example, people talk about making tattoos and stuff as if it's some kind of criminal activity. It's asserting your humanity in an inhuman environment, and using whatever is available to you to make a tattoo gun and drawing. Whatever you want to draw on yourself to express who you are and how you're fighting back against the system. And whether that's doing a tattoo, or making a lighter so you can light a cigarette, you can light up a joint, whatever you want to do, we have a whole range of technologies.

I'm very sorry to say that we credited this to the wrong person, and I can't remember the name of the person who actually did the drawing. It's a beautiful drawing, though, and it's interesting because he drew a black and white picture, which was nice, but then he just kind of threw this one in, and we looked at this, we said, "Whoa, this is awesome! We want to use this one."

Dolores Canales helped start the California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement in 2013 as a way to support the Pelican Bay hunger strikers. At the time, her son had been in solitary in Pelican Bay for over 12 years, after confidential informants had labeled him a gang member. Canales herself had spent more than two decades in prison, including some time in solitary.

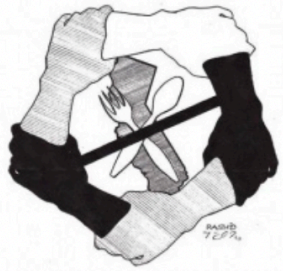
Their demands included: to end group punishment and administrative abuse, to abolish the debriefing policy (the practice in California prisons of placing alleged members of gangs in solitary indefinitely until they either died or identified other gang members), to end long-term solitary confinement, to end the denial of food as punishment, and to expand constructive programming for people given indeterminate sentences in the SHU.

The first hunger strike began on July 1, 2011. At its peak, more than 6,500 people from prisons across California refused to eat their meals. The strike lasted until July 20, when the California prison authorities agreed to review the conditions of solitary confinement. The second hunger strike took place from September 26 to October 16, 2011. On its third day, the strike reached its peak of 4,252 people refusing to eat across 8 prisons.[111]

The Short Corridor Collective, as they were now being called, spread word to people across California through letters to friends and families as well as to an activist group.

The third hunger strike began on July 8, 2013. On the first day, over 30,000 people in prisons across California and 4 out-of-state prisons refused their meals. After 3 days, more than 11,000 were still starving themselves. After 50 days, 42 people still had not eaten.[112] **It was the biggest organized hunger strike in US history.**

In the year following, the strike won a victory when more than half of those held in Pelican Bay SHU were transferred to other prisons. A lawsuit filed by the men in Pelican Bay SHU ruled that many of the practices in the SHU violated the constitutional rights of incarcerated people.[113]



By Rashid Johnson, incarcerated in Virginia

Eric King: DVI, is that a designation center?

James Kilgore: Yeah.

Eric King: So, then they decide you're going to High Desert, or do they put you somewhere else and you get transferred?

James Kilgore: No, they just sent me to High Desert.

Eric King: Would you describe vaguely, just so the people listening can understand, like a general overview of the California state prison system?

James Kilgore: Racist as hell. I came from South Africa, which was an apartheid state. When I left South Africa, they had dismantled apartheid. I'm not saying it was a total liberation, but they dismantled apartheid. When I moved to High Desert, I went back to apartheid. It was total segregation. Everything was segregated. All space is segregated. The tables in the yard are segregated, the showers are segregated, the phones are segregated, the basketball courts are segregated. If you're playing at the white end of the basketball court and your ball goes over half court, you've got to stop at half court and ask somebody to pick the ball up and throw it to you. You can't go get it. It's just total segregation. If you're in a day room, the day room has an imaginary line in the middle and the whites and the Southern Mexicans, so-called, and the Native Americans are on one side, and the Black people and the northern Mexicans are on the other side. If you want to talk to somebody on the other side, you go to the boundary and you shout across this imaginary line.

Eric King: That sounds very much more like my experience.

James Kilgore: Yeah, just a nightmare.

Eric King: One of the things that I think is so relevant in this conversation is that you were a wildly anti-racist white man when you entered prison, and you were confronted with just a thousand people that enforced a segregated code. Did you face problems from the white prisoners because of your politics, and did you receive any solidarity from the Black prisoners?

James Kilgore: I think the white prisoners had a mixed attitude toward

me, because part of what I was involved with involved putting bombs under police cars. It's tricky. I didn't boast about that. It wasn't particularly something I was proud of, because I don't think it was a good thing to do for a whole lot of reasons. But it probably saved me from getting really attacked by the white supremacists. The white population was kind of divided about how to handle me.

I also learned that treating people with a certain amount of respect can get you a long ways, but it might not take you all the way. But it'll get some people off your ass, if you don't just confront them every time they want to talk shit to you, or every time they want to say something you.

Eric King: One of the hard lessons I had to learn when I first got locked up [was that] I thought I could change prison. I thought I could rally everyone and revolutionize the whole yard, and we were going to take over the prison, and we were all going to be radicals and revolutionaries. I learned quickly that not only was that not the case, but that me trying to do that would cause lots of problems. People weren't trying to hear that shit. Did you ever try to, I don't want to say radicalize, but have these conversations, and were you incredibly disappointed when they did not come to fruition?

James Kilgore: I really never had that expectation. I didn't think that, particularly the white people in the prison, we were going to become revolutionaries. The best I could hope for them would be for them not to be aggressive white supremacists and be stabbing people. That was enough for me.

Eric King: Different parameters for different areas in your life.

James Kilgore: The thing is, I'm 55, I've been around this, but I've also had three years in the feds where I got a much better idea of what the white population is like. The white population at Lompoc, they weren't organized. Not to say that there was no white supremacists. The first night I got there, somebody with a big tattoo of Hitler on his arm came up to me and asked me if I needed anything. I said "I'm good." By that time, I had a feel for what this population was like. I'm trying to survive, I'm trying to get through there, you know.

Eric King: You pointed out you came in in your 50s, and oftentimes people

Okay, go ahead, Libertie. This is a beautiful drawing of a woman named Dolores Canales. I don't know if you're familiar with her at all, Eric, but she's done a lot of work around her son, who is in Pelican Bay and was part of the Pelican Bay hunger strike. She herself spent about 25 years in prison, some of that in solitary, and she's been a real key figure in terms of organizing support for the hunger strikers in Pelican Bay. This is a drawing by one of the artists that we commissioned.

"I feel myself at times as if I'm buried alive, as I feel myself that I wake up in the night and I can't breathe and I have anxiety, because I just imagine what it's like to be entombed day in and day out in a cement cell like that."[114]

DOLORES CANALES

formerly incarcerated founder of the California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement, describes what it was like to have her son, John Martinez, in the Pelican Bay SHU for several years
Illustrated by Brian Hindson, currently incarcerated in Texas

We reached out to them, and said we wanted to commission some portraits of different people and drawings of different people by people who are in, and we wanted to include their artwork in the book itself. We have about nine portraits of people by people who are incarcerated. This is one. This is not one of them, but this was done by somebody who was incarcerated.

Youth Justice

In 1995, after nearly two decades of mass incarceration, the US reached its peak level of juvenile incarceration, with more than 380,000 people under the age of 18 locked up. This was intensified by the policy of most states to try many juveniles as adults. This practice began in Florida in 1978 but spread to all states in the 1990s. The increase in the arrests of youth was also related to the increasing presence of police, titled as school resource officers, on high school campuses, especially in schools with a high presence of Black and Brown students. Many people labeled the funneling of youth into incarceration "the school-to-prison pipeline."

By the mid-1990s, a shift in consciousness occurred, and the majority of states began to roll back the prosecution of juveniles. Many states closed state youth prisons. As a result, the incarcerated youth population fell by 70% from 1995 to 2019. But this did not eradicate all the problems with the juvenile justice system. Racial disparity remained, with Black youth more than 4 times as likely to be jailed as white youth and Indigenous youth about 3 times as likely.[99] Furthermore, in some places youth incarceration was ridden with scandals. In one of the most infamous, the 2003–2008 Cash for Kids case in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, two judges received thousands of dollars from for-profit youth jails for sentencing youth to those institutions. The two judges, Michael Conahan and Mark Ciavarella, were charged and found guilty. Conahan got a 17-year sentence; Ciavarella received 28 years.[100]

What Juvenile Detention Looks Like

For the most part, juvenile sentences average much shorter than those of adults. Two-thirds of youth are held between 1 month and 6 months, and about ¼ are held for between 6 and 12 months. [101]

Crucially, about 1 in 10 youth are held in adult jails and prisons, which puts them at risk and also means that they often cannot access the services they need.

One in 5 kids in juvenile prisons and jails have not been found guilty or delinquent and are awaiting trial.

Marginalized populations are disproportionately targeted.

In 2015, 1 in 5 detained youth were LGBTQ+, meaning that LGBTQ+ youth were twice as likely to be detained. In detention centers and correctional settings,

will fall back on older prisoners. Did you ever have a situation where someone brought violence to you, or was it mostly just threats or shit talk?

James Kilgore: Nothing. A little shit talk, that's about it. See, here's one of the things. Gangs have rules, so one of the rules of the white supremacist gangs was, "We don't beat up the elders." That's why I was okay. If somebody wanted to beat me up, they're going to get beat up, regardless of who I was. I'm a white guy, you don't beat me up a white older guy. Give him some space.

Eric King: Did you get bottom bunk?

James Kilgore: Well, the guy I celled up with, most of the time he couldn't really climb up. He was disabled.

Eric King: Fair enough. During your time there, I read this in *Rattling the Cages*, you mentioned that one of the things that would help you cross racial barriers was sports. That was a huge thing for me as well, revolving around soccer and the NFL. Can you talk about the advantages or the benefits of this sports knowledge, and how it helped you build bonds or relationships with people across racial lines?

James Kilgore: It helped build relationships not only across racial lines but also with the white supremacists. I can sit and talk football or basketball with all these guys. It was a common language. It's also interesting how white supremacists don't mind cheering for LeBron James or Kobe Bryant —if they support the Lakers they're going to cheer for Kobe Bryant, regardless of whether he's Black or not. There's this whole weird dynamic.

The other thing is that I played basketball, and I could still play a little bit when I got to prison. I played a lot of basketball, because that gave me a certain prestige. I'm not a big guy. I'm not a physical guy. But I could play basketball, so that gave me a bit of prestige in the hierarchy of toxic masculinity. To be able to play a sport and be competent and be aggressive and all that shit, it's a plus. Aggression is rewarded in prison, like it is a point system.

Eric King: In your dorms or in the rec center was there a designated sports TV, or a TV room? Did one specific race have games on? How did that

work?

James Kilgore: Well, it was different in different places, but mostly it was by race.

Eric King: At High Desert the white guys would have the games on? Did you ever play the tickets?

James Kilgore: Actually, in the feds I was a computer teacher, so we printed out the tickets.

Eric King: Yes! One of my hustles was typing up the tickets for people on the typewriter, that way we could make copies of them.

James Kilgore: I see somebody's asking in the chat, what's play the tickets? It means you're betting on the football scores.

Eric King: It means gambling. You're betting on the games, you're betting on the spreads, and that is a very lucrative thing in prison. It's also a way that some people get severely hurt if they do not have the money to pay. It's also a great way to take your mind off the shit that is happening to you.

When you were inside did you ever try—as you said you're a highly educated person and my experience was that I didn't meet many people that had college educations or had read extensively and things like that—did you ever use that to help other prisoners? Did you ever use it to help them legally or intellectually or emotionally in any way?

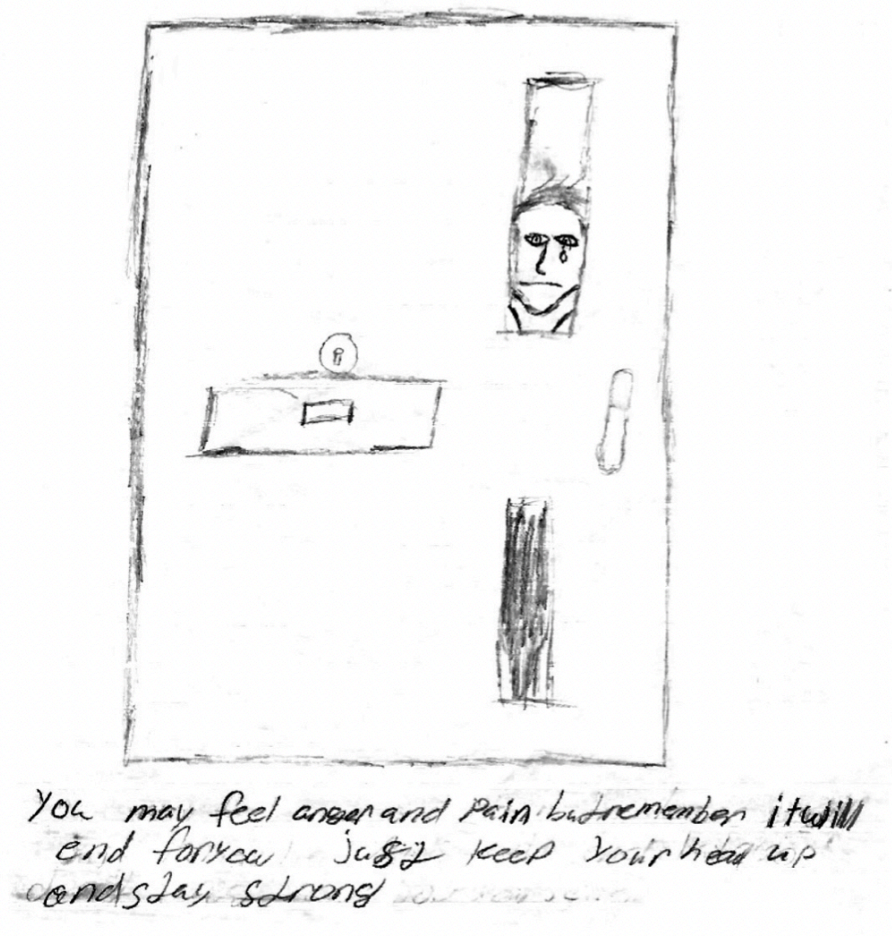
James Kilgore: Totally. I see that question just popped into the chat, too. Yeah, you're right, I spent most of my time in prison being a tutor, a GED tutor. I worked with guys a lot when I was in the feds. When I was in Dublin, I started an ESL class. I also started a Spanish as a second language class. I tried to do some workshops.

When I was in the state, I was the teacher's aid to the GED teacher. One day the GED teacher was in the middle of doing math, and she couldn't do math for shit, so she said, "I'm going to just let Mr. Kilgore teach the math class." Just out of the blue. So, from there that completely changed me, because I was a math teacher in Zimbabwe. I could do this stuff in my

Eric King: Is this drawing by an incarcerated kid?

James Kilgore: Yeah. One of the things that we included in here, and I'm not sure if it's in the deck, but we actually reached out to incarcerated artists. We worked through, I think it's called the Justice Art Coalition, and they correspond with a lot of people who do art who are incarcerated.

Artwork by S., a youth incarcerated in Montana
Quaranzine #2, Free Verse



Disability and Prison

People in prison are 3x more likely than people outside of prison to have at least one disability.[87]

People categorized as disabled are disproportionately incarcerated. For example, nearly 4 in 10 state prisoners and 3 in 10 federal prisoners reported having a disability; 50% of female state prisoners and 39% of male state prisoners reported having a disability. **The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that fully 1 in 5 people in prison have a serious mental illness.**[88]

The high rate of incarceration of people with disabilities is largely a result of the closure of facilities that previously housed people with mental health issues. In 1955, state mental health institutions held 559,000 people in the US—roughly the same population as prisons. By 2000, it had fallen to less than 100,000—about 7% of the prison population at that time.[89]

These problems are particularly evident in jails, which typically have even fewer services than prisons. According to research by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, "Jails have become the default case management system for repeat, low-level offenders who are often houseless, often have substance abuse disorders, and often have mental health issues, traumatic brain injuries, or other chronic health issues."[90]

People with disabilities are subject to greater abuse and mistreatment in prison.

A report by the Center for American Progress noted that in 4 out of 12 of the California prisons studied, **84 to 94% of all incidents of state use of force were directed towards inmates with cognitive disabilities.**[91]

In Colorado, individuals with cognitive disabilities were 10 times more likely to have the state use force against them than those without. Incarcerated individuals with cognitive disabilities also experience a higher prevalence of sexual assault.[92]

And the impact of incarceration on mental health can be long term. As a team of psychiatrists from the University of Pennsylvania concluded, "Incarceration is related to subsequent mood disorders, related to feeling 'down,' including major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and dysthymia. These disorders, in turn, are strongly related to disability, more strongly than substance abuse disorders and impulse control disorders."[93]

Eric King: Full disclosure, I have to work on that sometimes because, I'll find myself patronizing people with disabilities inside, as if they're not fighters or as if they're not humans. I really like this picture. And that's something I've got to check myself on a lot of times. There's a dude in ADX right now, and he's got two hooks, he blew off his hands. He's an Egyptian jihadi and he has the two hooks, but they won't give him prosthetic hands, so he has to try to eat that way. It's just such a nightmare. I don't know why I brought that up, but it's true.

James Kilgore: No, absolutely.

sleep. I just took over and I ran the class. Then what I did was I asked her if we could run a workshop—because this was the time of the 2008 global economic crisis. One of the things I did in southern Africa is I ran economics classes for trade unionists and community organizations on big economic issues like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the IMF, because these were organizations that impacted the working class in South Africa. I knew how to take these complicated policies and make them accessible to people. The people I was teaching in South Africa, for most of them English was a third, fourth, fifth language.

I had wanted to do this workshop and I told [the GED teacher] I wouldn't break these people up by race, but I was going to just count off. She said, "Well, I don't know about this. This is pretty scary." Blah, blah, blah. I said, "I'll tell you what? I'm going to go around to every student in here, and I'm going to ask them if it's okay if we do these groups non-racial, just at random." I went around to every student in there, and they all agreed. We did this amazing workshop, it was a role-play workshop where one group of people had to be an organization that represented African countries, another group had to be the United Nations, another group had to be the United States, corporate America. Then we threw out policies, and each group had to say how is this going to affect them if we put this into play. If they privatized, if they did free trade, etc., how is this going to impact them? We did this amazing, really fabulous workshop, and one of the guys in there, a white supremacist guy, he told me that he had a visit that weekend after our workshop, and he said that he told all his family about what was happening with the economic crisis, and they looked at him, and they just said, "How the hell do you know all this shit? You're sitting in jail." I'm a teacher, that's what I've done for most of my life, so I tried to use that education as much as possible in the prison.

There's a couple of things I really would like to talk about. One of the things I wanted to talk about was how being in southern Africa changed my political perspective. I came to Southern Africa as somebody who supported the liberation movements and their armed struggle. Libertie was talking about this before, but I saw that when these armed liberation movements, particularly in Zimbabwe, took power they became very undemocratic. Part of the reason they became undemocratic is because they came from a military tradition which was very authoritarian. Anyways, they didn't have a practice of organizational democracy. That started me thinking a little more critically about liberation movements

and armed struggle as a strategy. Now, when I got to South Africa, I worked with trade unions, and trade unions had an incredible culture of internal democracy. If they ran a meeting, they would have a facilitator, a chairperson, but people would not interrupt each other. They would not name call. They had a whole structure. They would put motions onto the floor, and they would discuss them. They would also consider resolutions as an organization. There would be global resolutions.

For example, in a national meeting of trade unions, they would come forward with a resolution to support the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, to support the Palestinian people. Then the organization as a whole would discuss it, and then they would vote on it. Then that would become part of their policy. But they also elected, they had shop floor leaders, they had shop stewards, who were the people who represented, say, a unit within a factory, and those would be the people that would go and negotiate with the bosses. But they would be forced to be accountable to the workers that they represented. The workers would tell them, "Go and ask for a 10% raise." Okay, they would then be bound by that decision to go and ask for a 10% raise. Now, if the bosses said, "We'll give you a 7% raise," they could not say, "Okay, we'll take seven." They had to go back to the membership and say, "The bosses are offering seven. What do you say let's talk about it." There was that whole structure of democracy.

But it was important for me that there was structure, that there was leadership. But there was also plenty of space for people, rank and file members, to participate. Not only did this exist at the level of the trade unions, but it existed at the level of residences. You had things called civic organizations, which were organizations of residents. And they had organizations at the street level, organizations at the block level, organizations at the area level, organizations at the city level, organization at the county level, the state level, and the national level. Each one of those would have an internal democratic structure and an elected leadership, and they would interact in different ways with their structure.

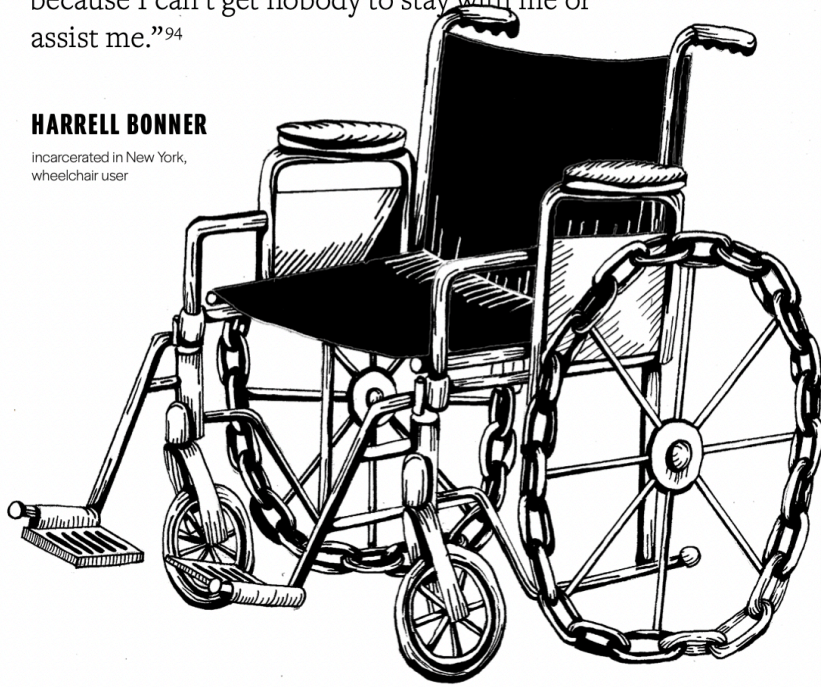
But the national decisions would be taken all the way down to the grassroots to vote on and discuss, and then come all the way back up to the leadership. For me, this was really an important experience to see how this worked in a big organization on a national level. I worked for, say, the national union of metal workers. Maybe they had 300,000 members, but

We also wanted to talk about disability. Here's a brilliant drawing. If you look at the wheels, the chains, I mean, Vic gave a lot of thought to this, because there's a lot of pictures of people who are disabled trying to struggle with being in prison, and there's also an aspect of that which is almost pornographic, that you're looking at people who are incarcerated through the eyes of feeling sorry for them, feeling this pity for them, which is not exactly the picture that we wanted to make. We wanted to find a way to try to make sure it got represented, but to make sure it didn't get represented as just, "These poor people."

"Once I saw I couldn't get a pusher I gave up. If I want to go to rec to play chess, I might have to go [to] the restroom. **It's mind-wrecking when I can't go.** I have to urinate or whatever on myself and I'm tired of that so I just stay in because I can't get nobody to stay with me or assist me."[94]

HARRELL BONNER

incarcerated in New York, wheelchair user



“They wanted to force me to be someone that I wasn’t. They wanted me to delegitimize myself as a trans woman and I was not taking that.

As a proud black trans woman, I was not going to allow the system to delegitimize, hyper-sexualize and take my identity away from me.”[82]

CECE MCDONALD

formerly incarcerated
trans activist

Being LGBTQ+ in Prison

People who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or other gender-nonconforming identities (+) are often ignored in analyses of prison populations. Unbelievably, the most recent survey of this population took place in 2012. The survey concluded that 1 in 3 people in women’s prisons identify as LGBTQ+. In men’s prisons, 1 in 20 people identify as LGBTQ+. Nearly half of all Black trans people have experienced incarceration.

Several factors contribute to the criminalization of LGBTQ+ people, including: police bias, anti-trans laws, anti-LGBTQ attitudes, the failure of schools to offer safe space for LGBTQ+ students, and discrimination in setting bail. Some activists label these practices as a “discrimination-to-incarceration pipeline” that channels LGBTQ+ people into disproportionate levels of imprisonment, particularly among youth. Twenty percent of those in the juvenile legal system are LGBTQ+.

Many facilities respond to harassment and assault of LGBTQ+ people by placing those who have been harmed in solitary confinement, allegedly for their protection, but usually to the great detriment of their mental health.

Transgender people often require special hormone therapy or gender-affirming surgery. However, to receive these therapies requires an examination, which is usually denied. A survey by Black and Pink, an abolitionist organization that provides service and support to incarcerated LGBTQ+ folks, found that only 1 in 5 incarcerated LGBTQ+ people had access to underwear and cosmetics that matched their gender identity.

In 2013, CeCe McDonald, a Black transgender woman, killed a man who was harassing and threatening her and her friends outside a bar in Minneapolis. Originally charged with manslaughter, authorities reduced the charges to second-degree manslaughter. McDonald plead guilty and served 19 months in a men’s prison. Upon her release, she became a high-profile activist campaigning for the rights of transgender people and for reforms of the criminal legal system, including the right of an incarcerated person to define their gender.

they still had these structures of democracy that the leadership adhered to. For me that was the most... I mean, I would say that these people were not pacifists, but they didn’t see armed struggle as the main tactic of their struggle. It was but one tactic in their struggle. But, more importantly, they wanted to be engaged in mass action and build the power of their organization to impact changes in the society.

Eric King: Now, is that something that you thought was missing from the American radicals at that time?

James Kilgore: Well, I think it existed, but it wasn’t as widespread as it could have been, and it wasn’t as systematized as it could have been. But now, since I’ve been here post-prison release, what I’ve found is an antipathy to organization and an antipathy to leadership, particularly in abolitionist circles. People don’t want to have a leadership structure. I’m not trying to promote authoritarian leadership, but I’ve been in organizations where there’s no structure, where you get to a meeting and there’s no agenda, it’s not clear who’s running the meeting, and it just turns into chaos. That’s part of the lesson that I learned, and I think it impacted the way in which some of the mass uprisings that took place didn’t stick, because we didn’t build structures that could enable those movements to stick together.

When everybody’s in the street, yeah, we’re together, but what happens when everybody’s not in the street? What carries the movement forward then?

Eric King: That’s why I was talking about snitch culture earlier. In my experiences, the reason why we have—and I’m just speaking for my limited experience—the leadership ended up leaving or being removed because, even in this small community, they either became authoritarian or the group would have been so infiltrated with rats, or people would suspect everyone of being rats. Even in our small affinity groups, there was no real trust. And if you don’t trust the person next to you, you’re not going to trust the person who’s leading. That’s what I’ve seen. And they just crumble. They crumble from there.

I don’t even know if that’s on point with what you were saying.

James Kilgore: No, it’s on point. But what’s our problem? I mean, is the

problem our politics, or is the problem that the police are infiltrating and disrupting our organizations, and we're not able to sustain them? It's probably both. I think there's another macro problem of everyone, not everyone, but too many people, wanting to be at the top. Too many people think that they are the ones leading and everyone should listen to them, and when it turns out that they're not, that causes a lot of division. We can't have that many captains. You need a structure, though. You need to say, "Okay this is our organization. These are the positions we have, one, two, three, four." Everyone can't be one, and you elect them, and they're accountable to you.

Eric King: Next question. You had brought up the abolition movement a minute ago, and something you were talking about, how you saw problems within it, how do you... Well, let me go back to the book. In your chapter, you talk about how something you saw that you disagreed with was what you labeled "abolition puritanism," or purism, where people make this decision that it's either no prison at all, or I'm not going to do anything, and they end up abandoning people. I've heard some argue that reform is bad, and some say we have to make it as good as possible until we tear it down. Where do you stand on that today?

James Kilgore: Well, as somebody who's been in prison, there is no way I'm going to say we don't need any reforms. If somebody's sitting in solitary confinement for five years, I'm going to do whatever I can to get them out, pure and simple. I don't care what you want to call that, that's just basic solidarity. I mean, I did a lot of research work, ironically, on electronic monitoring. I had a lawyer, an abolitionist lawyer, say one of their clients was going to be put on electronic monitoring, but I didn't think that they should be put on electronic monitoring because that's another form of prison. I believe it's another form of prison, but that's not your decision to make. That's the decision of the person that's got to decide what's my situation here. Am I going to be better off being out on electronic monitor or do I want to stay in prison? And that got even more intense during Covid.

How do we make those decisions? I mean, I'm not going to oppose... There's a lot of reforms that we could make to the prison system. There's this thing people call 'non-reformist reform,' which [asks] does the reform give more power to the police, does it give more money to the police, does it advance the power of people on the ground to organize? I think those

This is a picture that Vic drew of CeCe McDonald, who is a trans woman that got charged because she fought back basically. We wanted to bring out at least some of the details of what it was for people who are LGBTQ+ inside prison.

Eric King: I can tell you that being trans in the feds—I can't speak for the state—but in the feds, if they put you at the wrong custody level, they're trying to kill you. It is a death sentence. And even at the best custody level, it's still just a chance for these pigs to try to degrade and dehumanize these people. So, all solidarity with our trans family inside.

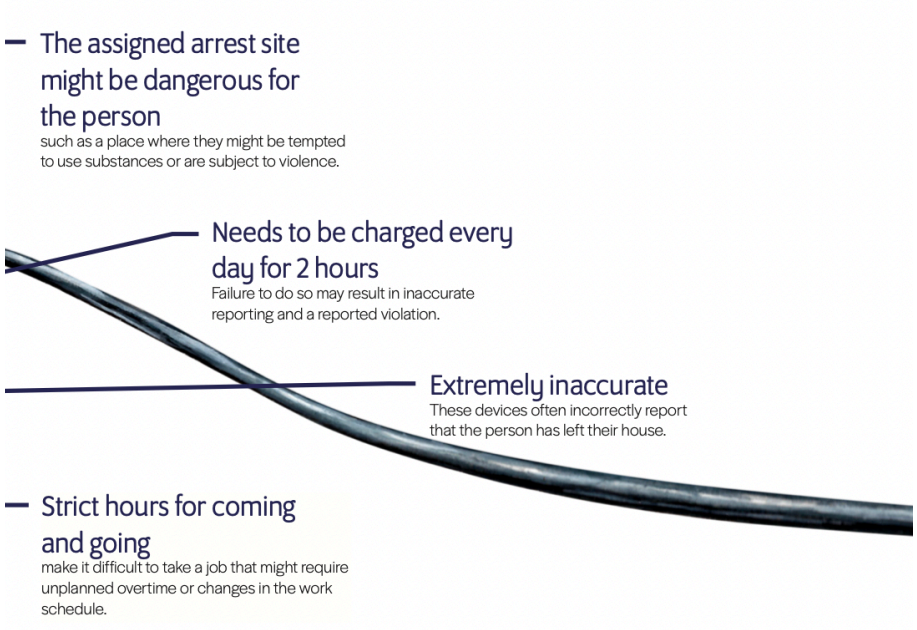
James Kilgore: Totally. That's the same in the state. It is life-threatening being gay, being trans. Being any of that is life-threatening.

Electronic ankle monitors first came into use in the 1980s. Judges and prosecutors viewed them as a soft alternative to prison. As their use spread, they seeped into every corner of the criminal legal system, used in pretrial release, postprison supervision, juvenile justice, and immigration and DUI cases. The first electronic monitors (EMs) simply told authorities whether a person was at home. But in the early 2000s, manufacturers added GPS tracking capacity to these devices. This meant the monitor could track you everywhere you went 24/7.

As the use of these devices has spread, the lived experience of being on a monitoring regime has led to an increasing critique of their use. In most cases, electronic monitors come with a strict regime of house arrest, requiring a person to get permission from a judge or a parole officer to leave their house for any purpose. Leaving the house without permission or returning later than the agreed-upon hour can lead a person back behind bars.

Eric King: My counselor, every week this piece of shit would bring me into his office and he would track where I'd gone to see if it matched up with where I'd called and told them because of the ankle monitor. Well, you were on this street for 38 seconds, you were supposed to be at this street. Like just micro, nitpicking, just trying to find ways to put me back in prison.

James Kilgore: These ankle monitors are serious. They ruin people's lives, and they don't work. I mean, they locate people in places where they're not. They're very sloppy technology. I spent a year on it.


The assigned arrest site might be dangerous for the person
such as a place where they might be tempted to use substances or are subject to violence.
Needs to be charged every day for 2 hours
Failure to do so may result in inaccurate reporting and a reported violation.
Extremely inaccurate
These devices often incorrectly report that the person has left their house.
Strict hours for coming and going
make it difficult to take a job that might require unplanned overtime or changes in the work schedule.

are important questions to ask, but we also need to ask, "How much power do we have [and] what can we win with the power that we have?" In different moments we have different levels of power. In 2020, we were able to exact a whole lot of shit from the police and elected officials around policing. How's it going today? Not so good. It seemed like that was a big opportunity, and I don't know if it panned out well.

Part of it is that the other side always fights back. They usually have a better infrastructure, and they're a little bit better prepared than we are. One of the things that upset me most when I got out of prison, after doing what I'd consider at least decently hard time, was hearing people tell me that reform or trying to make things better inside was reactionary or reformist, and that it was working hand in hand with the state. I started thinking about my friends who had been in 24-hour lockdown for 15 or 20 years. We're not tearing down the prisons tomorrow, and I want their lives to be as good as possible as quickly as possible. Anybody who says that, 99 times out of 100, they've never been locked up.

Eric King: That's what I was saying, too, because if they've been locked up, they know that improving the conditions for people is a win. I see the comment in the chat about people who haven't been locked up have no right to comment on that.

James Kilgore: Well, in that sense I agree that whatever we can do for people... I mean, there's a difference between what you fight for at an individual level and what you fight for strategically, because strategically we're abolitionists. We don't want prison, but at the same time, what can we do at the moment? What's possible at the moment with the political power that we have to make change? We have to be able to also assess our own political potential, our own political power. What can we do, what can we change, and what can't we change? We've got to accept that there's some things we can't change right now, but we ought to try to change what we can and think very carefully about where all the things we're trying to do fall into that.

Eric King: I think that's really important for people to remember. It's okay if right now we can only get better food to where people can actually eat like humans. That's still worth fighting for.

James Kilgore: Let's take another example. Let's talk about having a

ceasefire in Palestine. It's not total liberation, but it sure as hell saves lives. Let's talk about getting food into Palestine. Let's talk about getting medicines into Palestine. Those are reforms but, shit, come on now.

Eric King: That's a great analogy, too.

James Kilgore: It's still better to keep people alive. It's not our position to tell them what they should or shouldn't accept as a reform.

Eric King: Did you see Carlos's question? It says, is this what dialectal materialism is all about?

James Kilgore: Well, we can call it that if you like.

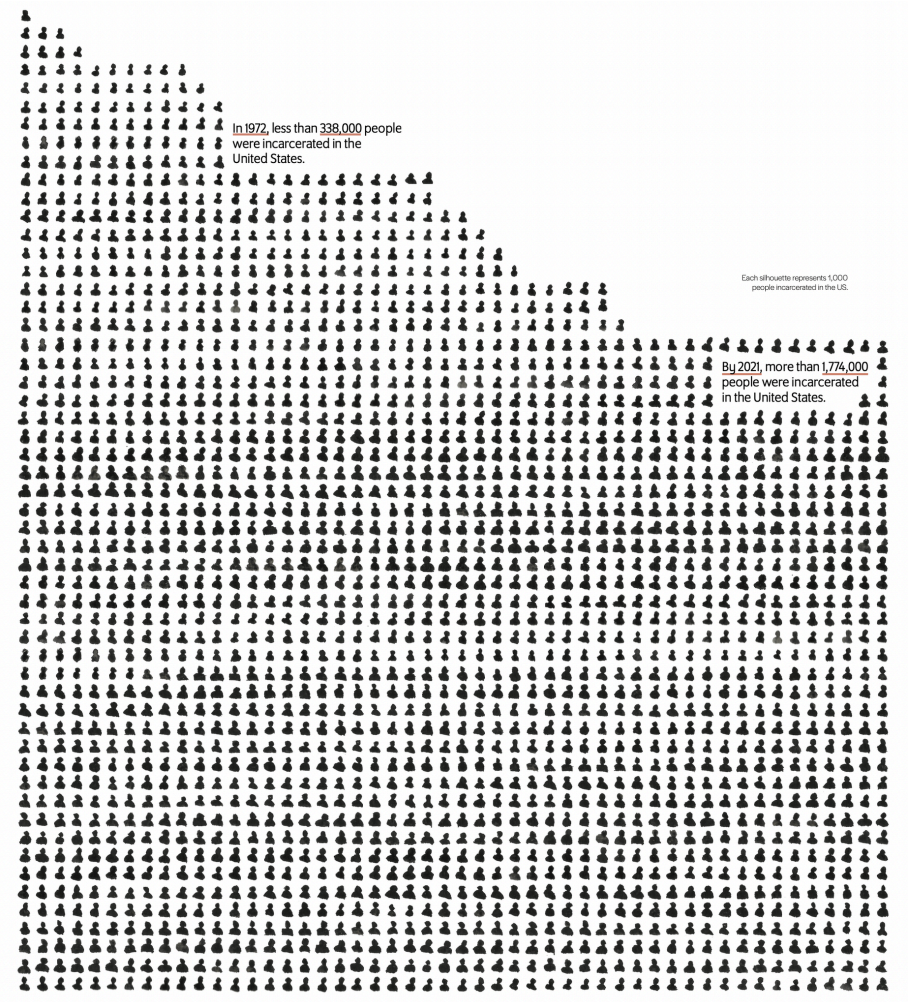
Eric King: Okay, yeah, fair enough. We're getting close to time, but I've still got a couple questions I really want to know about. You were underground for almost 30 years. A good chunk of time, I'd say, like a legit little bid. And then you get out, and you get out to America. What was that transition like to living now back in the States after doing your time? How did you find re-acclimating to the world?

James Kilgore: My partner got a job at the University of Illinois, so I moved to Champagne-Urbana, Illinois. A small town. Keep in mind, for the previous 20 years I've lived either in southern Africa or in prison, and now I'm moving to this overwhelmingly white small town, which is in the middle of the corn fields of Illinois. We're surrounded by corn, let me tell you. I mean it was wonderful to be able to see my mother, to be able to see my partner, to be able to spend time with the kids, and all that. That was fantastic. Politically, I had no idea what the hell I could do. It just seemed like an impossible situation, and I had a really terrible attitude toward everybody in the community that hadn't been locked up. I just feel like you people are soft, you don't know what you're talking about.

Then in 2011, the county sheriff blessed me with a proposal to build a jail in the county. He wanted to spend $20 million on the jail. I said, "This is my moment. I'm fighting this shit." We put together some reading groups on *The New Jim Crow*, and we fought for the next 8 years to try to stop them from spending money on the jail. But that got me out of that bubble of "I'm coming from prison, I've got nothing in common with any of you." I gradually then started working more with people who were coming

This [4th slide] is a little piece about electronic monitors, showing how the device works. But it also shows the way in which Vic did these incredible drawings of things which illustrate some of the details. Because we wanted to combine the sort of macro picture of mass incarceration as a number, as a statistic, and the details of what it means to be under mass incarceration at a daily level. How does it reach down to you? How does it reach down to your very ankle with this technology that tracks you and makes you plug yourself in every night in order to get the electronic monitor charged?

Electronic Monitoring and E-Carceration
Ankle monitors, or ankle shackles as some call them, come with many other problems, including:
Costs an installation fee and a daily monitoring fee
These fees range between $5 and $25 a day. Installation can cost up to $200 and require a landline phone.
Difficulty in the case of an emergency
where the person may not have the time to contact the proper authority before they need to act.


In 1972, less than 338,000 people were incarcerated in the United States.
Each silhouette represents 1,000 people incarcerated in the U.S.
By 2021, more than 1,774,000 people were incarcerated in the United States.

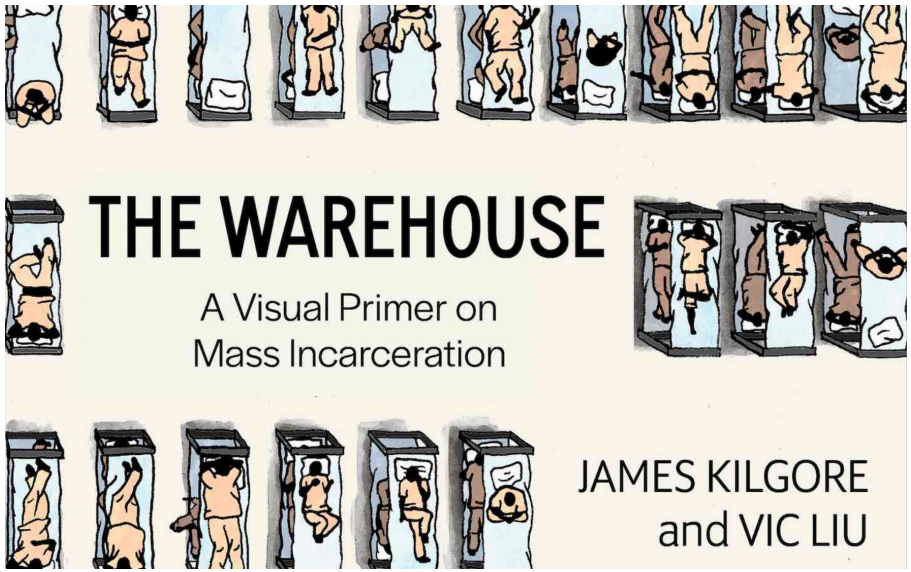
The next slide is her way of showing mass and incarceration, showing these profiles of people in large numbers and how it grew from less than 338,000 in 1972 to more than two million by 2009. That's a stunning statistic, as well. We want to make these statistics accessible to people.

home from prison. We have a predominantly Black group of formally incarcerated folks, and we've been doing a lot of work since that time, helping them with reforms like housing, employment, etc. But also doing a lot of advocacy work with the elected decision-makers to try to make some change.

Vic was supposed to be on this call with us. Vic is a wonderful graphic artist who did the graphics for the book. So, I would really like to share some of the graphics with the people that are still on, because I think they're really interesting. We're talking about a book that's trying to make the idea of mass incarceration accessible to people in a way that so much of the academic work that's out there does not do.

Eric King: And a lot of people will see it afterwards, too, on YouTube. We get lots of views there.

James Kilgore: Thank you so much. Okay, so this is the cover of the book, and you can see that this is like an aerial view of a prison dorm. Vic did this drawing based on a picture of a dorm in Alabama, I believe it was. The spacing and the bodies and everything about this is true to the proportions and the realities of what she saw. You can't see it here, but it goes all the way down, all over. It covers the entire cover, so it really is a visual of mass incarceration.



There [3rd slide] you see how it grew to 1.77 million in 2021, but that sort of slid past the main peak, which was 2009. This is a familiar scene to those of us that were in California prisons in the early 2000s. They took every gym in every prison and turned it into a dorm. I was in one of these for a very short period of time, two or three weeks. But the place that I was in had three tiers instead of two, so you had three bunks. The middle one we called the coffin because it was like being in a coffin. I was on the top ones.

Eric King: Pictures like this are nightmarish. They give me chills.

James Kilgore: Yes. This is really such a powerful picture of mass incarceration. A lot of people have seen some of these pictures of California prisons, but even still I think it's pretty powerful. To make matters worse, this space is also segregated, so you can only walk down certain aisles. You can't go here, you can't go there, you can't use this toilet. It makes it difficult just to get around, because you've got all these racial codes in place.